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The Cinderella of Occupations: Managing the Work of Department Store Saleswomen, 1900–1940*

¶ *Of all forms of personal services supplied to business enterprise, that of sales workers has perhaps defied the application of "standard" management practices more than any other. Professor Benson shows that this generalization is especially applicable to female department store sales personnel, who were necessarily recruited chiefly from "lower" social classes whose members lacked education and refinement. Thus, regimentation and rote training seemed appropriate. On the other hand, selling style goods to sophisticated female customers involved elements not of a trade but an art, and an attitude of deference, which was not a common trait among working-class girls. Department store managers, almost exclusively male, failed to solve this paradox and, as Professor Benson relates, failed also to deal with the invisible solidarity of female sales persons.*

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the department store as Americans would know it until after World War II was a familiar feature of urban life. These giant emporiums, expanding rapidly after 1880, pursued policies distinctively different from their ancestors in wholesaling or small-scale specialized retailing. The dingy and cluttered store was eclipsed by a lavishly decorated palace of consumption, which not only presented goods in a well-organized and tempting way but also offered a variety of services and public accommodations. The simple newspaper announcement of goods for sale was replaced by aggressive and attractive display advertising. The one-price system put an end to the older custom of haggling between clerk and customer, and the free-entry policy replaced the habit of harassing customers until they bought something as the price of their escape. Finally, the male monopoly behind the counters

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yielded to a preponderance of females.[1] By 1900, department store managers were beginning to realize that these changes in practices and personnel had not automatically produced an effective selling force; by 1910, the effort to develop a distinctive style of department store selling had taken first place on their agendas. This task was both difficult and complex, involving the peculiar demands of retailing in itself with vexing issues of class and sex affecting American society as a whole.

Because most business history concentrates on manufacturing enterprises, it is useful to begin by comparing the factory to the store. In the most general sense, managers of both types of business had begun by 1900 to face the twin problems of production and consumption with a new self-consciousness and determination. The impact of the new style of management on a given enterprise varied according to its size, location, competitive position, and the personal inclinations of its executives. Yet, despite this unevenness, trade associations in major production and distribution fields developed and codified a new managerial wisdom which framed the problems, possibilities, and goals for each industry, shaping both the consciousness and the actions of its executives. In industry after industry, the ultimate prescription was a thoroughgoing process of rationalization, systematization, and closer control of all aspects of the business. The concerns of the conscientious manager ran the gamut from the most minute aspect of production to shaping a new ethic of consumption in the society at large.

Although thoughtful executives in both stores and factories agreed on the ultimate goal of rationalization, the differences in social reality within their firms meant that they faced very different problems in implementing the new ideas. For the factory executive, efforts to rationalize production and consumption were neatly compartmentalized. Within the factory, the problem was to motivate workers to produce more goods in less time and at less cost; outside its walls, the task was to encourage people to buy these goods more freely and with less concern for necessity. While industrial managers could thus run their factories with a single-minded concern for productivity, and leave the fabrication of demand to advertising

[1] Ralph M. Hower, "Urban Retailing 100 Years Ago," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*, 12 (December 1938), 91–101; Harry E. Resseguie, "Alexander Turney Stewart and the Development of the Department Store, 1823–1876," *Business History Review*, 39 (Autumn 1965), 301–322; "Filene Co-Operative Association," *The Echo*, 11 (October 9, 1913); "The One-Idea Clerk," *Dry Goods Economist*, 69 (July 24, 1915), 32; Robert H. Durbin, *Department Stores of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1917), 5. I will use the masculine pronoun to refer to managers, and the feminine to refer to salespeople. The overwhelming majority of department store managers at decision-making levels were men; the overwhelming majority of salespeople were women.

executives and copywriters, department store managers enjoyed no such luxury.

The heart of their operations—the selling floor—brought workers and customers face to face, creating the problem of simultaneously encouraging efficiency in the former and leisurely consumption in the latter. The store's basic accounting unit, the sales transaction, was used to measure both the salesperson's effectiveness in selling and the customer's willingness to buy. At best, the impossibility of separating the two made the store executive's task far more complicated than that of the factory manager; at worst, it enmeshed him in a web of contradictions that grew out of his curious betwixt-and-between position. Retailers sought on the one hand to control and supervise their workers and their firms as closely as any of their factory counterparts: they acted like managers pure and simple. Yet they also wished to make a complex social statement that involved issues of class and sex, psychology and aspiration, identifying consumption with a life of style, respectability, and urbanity: they acted, to use Stuart Ewen's phrase, like captains of consciousness.[2]

From about 1900 to about 1940, the cornerstone of the retailer's effort to resolve this contradiction was what he called skilled or personal selling. Stripped to its essentials, skilled selling involved the use of trained salesclerks to increase both the size and number of sales transactions. It spoke to the problem of productivity by building more intensive sales efforts into the definition of skill, and to the problem of consumption by requiring the salesperson to appeal to customers' vanities of class and sex. Skilled selling, successfully implemented, would logically have resolved the department store manager's dilemma.

In reality, skilled selling did not solve the retailer's economic or social problems in any such neat way. In the broadest sense, department store managers were going against the grain of major twentieth-century trends in business management.[3] They hoped to foster skill in an era when the central tendency of management policy was to expand unskilled and semiskilled labor. They undertook to monitor that skill with the supervisory and accounting methods developed elsewhere to deskill and regiment workers. Even more, they attempted to harness skill in social interaction, a most

[2] Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York, 1976).

[3] My understanding of these trends has been shaped in large part by Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1975); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); and Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974).

unmanageable quality and one even less susceptible to control than manual skill. In the factory, manual skill could ultimately though not easily be taken into the hands of management, mental and manual work could be divorced, and skill separated from the social relations of the workplace. In the store, however, the skill of selling was intimately and organically bound up with the social relations of the selling floor and the work group; only when left in the hands of the workers could it have the desired effect on sales. Ultimately, store managers had an apples-and-oranges problem: they were trying to combine elements that grew out of fundamentally different systems.

The reasons why they found themselves in this untenable position become clear only in the context of the historical development of large-scale urban retailing. For present purposes, we can divide the history of the industry at about 1900, bearing in mind that department stores developed unevenly and eccentrically and that changes did not occur simultaneously across the country. By about that time, department stores had seized center stage in the central business districts of American cities. The range of goods they offered, the luxury and excitement of their ambiance, and the appeal of their merchandising methods succeeded in attracting large crowds. In the estimation of the stores' controllers, however, these crowds spent their money too infrequently or too thriftily; the public spectacle of the department store was commercially viable only if financed by high sales levels.

Selling was the bellwether function of the store; as one industry writer phrased it in 1915, "The selling force is the best place to start at when a general speeding-up of the entire organization is necessary or desired. And in view of the position of the salesforce as a motive power, increase of salesforce efficiency will stimulate all the other parts of the machinery."[4] No amount of cost-cutting efficiency behind the scenes could compensate for lackluster sales efforts, for only through skilled selling could the heavy burden of fixed costs for lavish public accommodations and "free" services such as delivery be materially lightened. Self-service was not an option in the minds of pre-World-War-II managers except in isolated instances; the culture of consumption rested on service and amenity, not on efficiency alone. Moreover, skilled selling was a response to the chronic problem that undermined attempts to rationalize retailing: the industry's built-in variability. The volume of customers and their willingness to buy varied according to the season of the year, the day of the week, and the hour of the day as well as with the weather and

[4] "Training in Sales by Suggestion Builds Efficiency," *Dry Goods Economist*, 69 (July 31, 1915), 31.

personal whim. Skilled salespeople would in theory maximize sales under all conditions and would respond resourcefully to changing opportunities and constraints.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, department store managers began to consider these questions with a new urgency. They shared with their factory colleagues the era's enthusiasm for efficiency, but the special demands of retailing sharpened their concern. Their tactics had solved one set of problems—the attraction of crowds—but had failed to touch another—the need to induce those crowds to buy more than they would from simple need or random impulse. Worried managers pinpointed the problem at the point of the sale and found a ready scapegoat in the "shopgirl," as the first generations of department store saleswomen were popularly dubbed with a mixture of scorn, condescension, and pity. Overworked and underpaid, they pleased neither their employers nor their customers.

An examination of industry and trade association periodicals, retail convention proceedings, and the store newspaper of the William Filene's Sons Company in Boston reveals that department store managers were deeply and persistently worried about the quality and behavior of their sales forces, and that they undertook extensive efforts to correct what they saw as salespeople's shortcomings. Although these sources do not trace the experience of any one firm with the thoroughness that a complete set of company records would, they do give a sense of the pervasiveness of managers' concern about their selling staffs. In stores large and small, in all parts of the country, retail executives redefined their expectations and treatment of their saleswomen. At national conventions, through personal contacts and local institutions such as Boards of Trade or the Research Bureau for Retail Training in Pittsburgh, and in the journals they discussed methods, traded experiences, testified to their successes and failures, and developed an industry-wide personnel stance. They did not of course speak with one voice, but what is striking about the sum of this literature is the notable agreement about basic goals and the shared conviction of the need to supplant the shopgirl with the skilled saleswoman.

The shopgirl was no accident; she was the direct result of management policies toward the salesforce. In the process of building, organizing, decorating, and systematizing the store, executives had given scant attention to the critical area of selling—the interaction across the counter. Believing on the one hand that selling as it had been practiced by men was an inborn knack, a

talent, a fine art, and convinced on the other hand that attractive goods presented in a luxurious environment would practically sell themselves, managers in the great era of department store expansion between 1880 and 1900 had easily convinced themselves that they needed only to staff the counters with neatly dressed, polite women who would sell mechanically and inoffensively. A statement attributed to A.T. Stewart, a pioneer in large-scale retailing in New York, summarized well the personnel theory of department store managers in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Gazing at the army of workers in his Astor Place "palace dry goods store," Stewart is supposed to have commented, "Not one of them has his discretion. They are simply machines working in a system that determines all their actions."[5] Convinced that all they needed were cogs on their wheels, department store managers wasted little time and energy on the development of their sales forces.

Stewart's view, and the inattention to the salesforce that it implied, came under sharp attack after the turn of the century. A perturbed industry observer summed up the difference between the old and new views on the subject: "As a rule, the salesforce grows up like Topsy. It is neither born nor made. No sensible attention is given to its creation nor to its training. The result speaks for itself more eloquently than any tongue can express. Every merchant should remember that his clerks are his personal representatives and that the public only know him, and pass their judgment upon him, from their CONTACT WITH HIS SALESFORCE."[6] The idea that the salesperson was the merchant's emissary to the public was the foundation of the emerging retail personnel wisdom. There was an element of respect for the salesperson in the new view, but there was also an element of fear—and both were aspects of the retailer's uneasy recognition of the alarming power of a group that he had earlier considered, when he had considered it at all, as a mannerly adjunct to the store's elaborate accounting systems. Once he faced the issue, he could not turn back from the realization that all his efforts in other aspects of store operation would go for naught if a customer intent on purchasing were offended or inefficiently served, if her desire to consume were not nurtured.

The "Shopgirl"

When department store managers focused their attention on the salesforce with a view to managing it as closely as they did the other

[5] Resseguie, "Alexander Turney Stewart," 314.
[6] "Train the Salespeople," *Dry Goods Economist*, 65 (December 3, 1910), 45.

parts of the store, two central factors shaped their actions. The selling personnel of the typical department store around 1900 were overwhelmingly working-class and overwhelmingly female. Class and sex were the critical issues in the store manager's attempt to develop a skilled salesforce, but they interacted in extremely complex ways, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory. Executives began by trying to change the class-based characteristics of their salespeople and by seeking to make use of their sex-based characteristics. In so doing, they unwittingly entered a maze of difficulties from which they never really extricated themselves.

The policies of late-nineteenth-century department store managers had built into their stores a class tension that troubled managers well into the middle of the twentieth. Their methods of attracting customers and their policies toward the salesforce conflicted sharply. Lavish stores and carriage-trade service enticed those who had the discretionary income to make the large purchases that were the stuff of department store profits. Although department stores ranged from the extremely exclusive to the popular-priced, it was the growing urban middle and upper classes whose trade managers most eagerly solicited, and whose cultural demands set the tone for the stores.[7] The *Dry Goods Economist*, a major trade periodical, editorialized on the subject:

> [C]loser contact with Old World manners has created in our opulent citizens a relish for subserviency on the part of those who attend upon them; and this tendency on the part of the newly rich is spreading even to those who do not possess the golden talisman which crooks so many knees. . . .
>
> More consideration for the customer on the part of the clerk will be insisted on. The "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude will be less and less tolerated. Here will be a greater recognition of those assistants who make sales in a quiet, dignified, respectful manner and with a minimum of friction.[8]

But department store selling was not attracting those who were of a mind to be "quiet, dignified, [and] respectful." The comparatively low pay, long hours, and difficult working conditions as well as the popular image of the tawdry shopgirl drove middle-class working women into other employment such as clerical work. Working-class saleswomen behaved in ways that were grounded in their own cultural background, but that offended their employers and customers alike. Contemporary portrayals of saleswomen frequently recall *Pygmalion* on a grand scale. Some resented the ingratitude of those who dared to be different from themselves: "Who will dare tell

[7] Hrant Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution, and Economics* (London, 1954), 21.

[8] "Retail Store Manners," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (January 8, 1910), 43–44.

you and me what a green, undisciplined, untrained stubborn girl is worth; and can any thinking person claim that the merchants of this country owe her a living wage?"[9] Others condemned specific offenses against proper demeanor, particularly those involving language and dress. Technically ungrammatical but widely used colloquialisms and familiar forms of address appalled employers; one observer noted censoriously, "[T]he salespeople have become so forward as to call customers 'Dearie.' The use of such terms is a liberty which the woman of finer sensibilities quickly resents."[10] Dress also conveyed a powerful class-laden message: customers were displeased when "they are approached by an employee who is overdressed and who bears on her person marks of opulence which apparently do not accord with her position."[11] The social conflict that pervaded relations between saleswomen and customers was fundamentally of the store manager's own making: eager for the cheap labor of uneducated women, viewing selling as semi-automatic, setting his sights on an affluent clientele, he had created the problem for which he blamed his saleswomen.

While managers condemned clerks' class attributes out of hand, they found much to recommend in their gender characteristics, for sex was a unifying factor in the store. A journalist writing in 1910 captured the overwhelmingly female flavor of the department store:

> Buying and selling, serving and being served—women. On every floor, in every aisle, at every counter, women. . . . Down in the basement buying and selling bargains in marked-down summer frocks, women. Up under the roof, posting ledgers, auditing accounts, attending to all the complex bookkeeping of a great metropolitan store, women. Behind most of the counters on all the floors between, women. . . . Filling the aisles, passing and repassing, a constantly arriving and departing throng of shoppers, women. Simply a moving, seeking, hurrying mass of femininity, in the midst of which the occasional man shopper, man clerk, and man supervisor, looks lost and out of place.[12]

Probably not more than one of eight department store customers was a man; and it was a rare department store after 1900 that did not have a clear majority of female salespeople.[13]

[9] *The Survey*, 29 (March 15, 1913), 842.

[10] *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (March 19, 1910), 48; see also, "Some Essentials in Salesmanship," *Dry Goods Economist*, 73 (September 27, 1919), 137; William Filene's Sons Company, *Salesmanship Standards* (Boston, 1924), 5.

[11] "Saleswomen's Appearance," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (November 20, 1909), 44.

[12] Rheta Childe Dorr, *What Eight Million Women Want* (Boston, 1910), 115–116.

[13] Kendall Banning, "Catching the Male Trade," *System*, 15 (May 1909), 485; "Ninety-Four Housewives Tell Why They Buy," *System*, 28 (November 1915), 481–489; "Why Women Buy," *System*, 28 (December 1915), 585–591; Archer Wall Douglas, "Why Don't More Women Trade With Me?", *System*, 32 (December 1917), 906–908; Zelie Leigh, "Shopping Round," *Atlantic Monthly*, 138 (August 1926), 200; Hower, "Urban Retailing," 93–94; Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858–1919: Chapters in the Evolution of the Department Store* (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), 114, 193; Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*, 21; Robert W. Twyman, *History of Marshall Field & Co., 1852–1906* (Philadelphia, 1954), 18–19, 69.

Certain aspects of women's culture dovetailed with managers' developing conceptions of what a skilled sales effort involved. Qualities that had for a century been encouraged in women—adeptness at manipulating people, sympathetic ways of responding to the needs of others, and familiarity with things domestic—fit nicely into a new view of selling. Managers urged saleswomen to transfer skills from the domestic to the commercial sphere, to treat their customers as "guests" in a store so designed as to make it a "supplement to the home."[14] Empathy and responsiveness constituted the irreducible core of selling skill; however definitions changed with fluctuations in the business cycle, twentieth-century selling always included the idea that the salesperson should be a lay psychoanalyst of the counter. A writer in 1911 urged, "Shop *with* the customer, not *at* her"; Macy's training director affirmed in 1940 that "interest in the customer's problems" was the major factor in selling success.[15]

More than individual "womanly" characteristics was involved; the emphasis on interaction resonated as well with the collective aspects of women's culture. Recent research in women's history has called attention to the existence of affective and supportive female networks. From Italian and Jewish women in close-knit immigrant communities in Providence, to middle-class women dispersed around the country, solidaristic female networks have been a persistent feature of women's experience over the last century or more.[16] They gave an important place to cooperative as opposed to competitive values, stressed the commonalities of female experience, and provided channels for the exchange of services and emotional support. As dimly as retail managers understood women's culture and its modes of functioning, in some unexamined way they defined selling skill in such a way as to reward women for being women, to give exchange value to their culture.[17]

[14] "A Creed," *Dry Goods Economist*, 68 (January 31, 1914), 69; G.W. Stoddard, "Giving a Store Home Surroundings," *System*, 15 (June 1909), 666.

[15] "Help the Customer Buy," *Dry Goods Economist*, 66 (December 9, 1911), 43; Orie W. Sherer, "Can Salesmanship Be Taught?", *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 22 (February 1940), 34.

[16] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, 1 (Autumn 1975), 1–29; Judith E. Smith, "Remaking Their Lives: Italian and Jewish Immigrant, Family, Work, and Community in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brown University, 1980).

[17] By the first decade of the twentieth century, managers had already had an impressive demonstration of the functioning of these networks in the campaigns of the Women's Trade Union League and the National Consumers' League. Observing the working lives of saleswomen first-hand, an increasingly socially conscious American womanhood had become outraged at the contrast between the "real, inner truth" of the department store and the veneer of luxury it presented, and was demanding a broad range of changes in the lives of saleswomen and other working women. Pressed by campaigns for trade unions, protective legislation, and voluntary reforms, store managers could hardly have been unaware of the potential of female networks. For a brief discussion of these organizations, see Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York, 1970), 207–209, 240–247.

Department store managers' attempts to use women's culture were less explicit and self-conscious than their efforts to suppress working-class culture. The men who dominated the upper levels of department store management were understandably more at home in discussing the issue of class than that of sex. Class was an attribute that they shared with their customers; to manipulate class-based culture in the store meant to make their working-class saleswomen act in a way that was less disruptive to social relations within the store. Sex, on the other hand, was an issue that divided managers from customers and saleswomen alike. To manipulate sex-based culture was problematic from the point of view of managers, since it meant trying to exploit a sphere that by definition remained closed to them.

Skilled Sellers

In elaborating their definition of skilled selling, department store managers rejected both the older ideal of the naturally gifted salesman and the then-current model of the passive, unskilled, order-taking saleswoman. Managers undertook to shape a whole new breed of clerks; no longer would they be content to take salespeople as they were, for good or for ill. The new skill could be codified and taught; in the words of a Chicago department store manager in 1910:

> There is no mystery in the art of salesmanship. The qualities required are born in every one, and only a reasonable amount of training is needed to bring these qualities to the surface and make them serviceable. . . .
>
> As I say, good salespeople are made. They make themselves. . . . The expression, "He is a born salesman" may have meant something twenty years ago before modern experience had analyzed all the little secrets of the art, but to-day no one with common sense, industry and a real desire to learn need fear to tackle the task of soon becoming a leader in the ranks of truly good salespeople.[18]

Most observers were more careful in asserting that the new skill would be under the control of managers; what was crucial was not that salespeople were self-made but rather that they be made by their superiors. As early as 1913, even a small-town retailer understood the importance of this point: "The success of salespeople is entirely the result of training, dependent entirely upon the opportunity for development and the result of the right working conditions. It lies within the power of every proprietor of every store, large or small, to

[18] "To Be Good Salesmen," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (February 26, 1910), 37.

re-create, re-construct, and re-organize the potential selling ability of his salespeople."[19]

As if confident of the ease of their task, department store managers began their efforts to create a new sales force with more careful supervision and elaborate rules. Rules prescribing efficient performance of work, courteous behavior, and proper demeanor proliferated in department stores in the early years of the twentieth century. But managers soon learned that "simple rules and enforcement won't work."[20] Similarly, early efforts at training salespersons focused almost exclusively on what was known as store system, or the proper use of forms and procedures for different types of sales. But the complex social dynamics of the selling floor demanded more than simple compliance with rules: it was at least as important how an item was sold as that it was sold at all.

The writer who asserted in 1913 that "The best salesperson . . . is *not necessarily* the one that *has the largest book*" ("book" was department store slang for a day's sales total) pointed to the difficulty of setting a clear quantitative standard for measuring sales performance.[21] An item had to be sold with due attention to the cultural aspects of consumption and not simply foisted off on the customer. Otherwise, the store stood to suffer an immediate loss from the return of the goods, and a long term loss from the customer's reluctance to visit the store again; worst of all, she might come to regard shopping in general as a disagreeable experience. High production in a factory was an unmixed blessing so long as it did not destroy the machinery, but high sales totals were seriously undermined if customers were annoyed by overbearing sales tactics. Machinery had no consciousness and would bear no grudges, but a customer offended could be a customer lost.

The message was not an easy one to convey to department store saleswomen. The new skilled sellers were to be thinking but also obedient employees; they were to follow store procedures to the last rigorous detail and yet respond creatively to opportunities to sell as they arose; they were to develop independent judgment but yet display unquestioning loyalty to the store; they were to try very hard to sell but not *too* hard. Managers were clearly uncomfortable with these contradictions and periodically despaired of teaching controlled discretion to their saleswomen. During the grim years of the

[19] Sidney S. Wilson, "How Retailer Keeps Trade at Home," *Dry Goods Economist*, 67 (March 1, 1913), 47.

[20] "Foster a House-Spirit," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (July 16, 1910), 28.

[21] "Breeds Disloyalty," *Dry Goods Economist*, 67 (March 22, 1913), 31; see also "Employee Rating System Maintains White House Personnel's Reputation," *Dry Goods Economist*, 79 (May 23, 1925), 13; *The Echo*, 45 (May 3, 1929).

1930s, for example, they succumbed to a vogue for drilling salespeople in "standard selling sentences" and in prescribed ways of dealing with various customer "types."[22] By 1940, however, the dominant theme of the department store trade association's national convention was that these cut-and-dried answers had proved useless and that the best rule for successful selling was the old standby—empathy with the customer.[23]

Since rules and procedures did not produce skilled selling, department store managers came to believe that nothing less than a thorough re-socialization of saleswomen would do. The customary agents of early socialization—the home and the school—had, in the view of these managers, failed to do their job. It was the fault, so they came to believe, of "unpropitious home surroundings and . . . defects in our education system" that so many salespeople "frequently speak and act in ways which do not commend them to people of refinement."[24] Working-class and immigrant children were simply not being assimilated into the respectable middle-class mainstream fast enough to fill the places behind the counters of department stores. The schools, moreover, were falling short in their methods as well as in the ideology they taught: they did not encourage thinking, provided only "*admonition*", and not "EXPLANATION", failed to teach students to "ANALYZE, rather than *memorize*."[25] These complaints are a measure of the degree to which department stores' labor requirements were different from those of manufacturers. Most of the latter would have been content had the schools inculcated the traditional virtues of hard work and obedience through admonition and memorization, while department store managers wanted initiative and independent judgment as well.

In order to work this transformation in those who became saleswomen, department stores undertook to "furnish the definitive, formative influences that the home and our educational facilities lack under present-day conditions."[26] The school-and-family imagery was pervasive in the retail literature: a 1916 discussion of Marshall Field's personnel department described it both as "Dean of Women" and as "a conscientious mother."[27] The theme was played out explicitly in the

[22] Agnes S. Cronin, "Ready-Made Responses for Salespeople," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 15 (August 1933), 68–70; O. Preston Robinson, "Customer Types in the Teaching of Salesmanship," *Journal of Retailing*, 13 (December 1937), 125–127.

[23] Miriam L. Eggers, "Should We Train People to Sell or Help the Customer Buy?," *Joint Management Proceedings of the National Retail Dry Goods Association—1940* (New York, 1940), 95–99.

[24] "Where the Schools Fail," *Dry Goods Economist*, 67 (May 10, 1913), 27.

[25] "Where the Schools Fail," 28.

[26] *National Civic Federation Review*, 4 (July 15, 1913), 24.

[27] "Creating Efficiency Among Store Employees," *Dry Goods Economist*, 70 (January 1, 1916), 45; "Looking After the Needs of Employees," *Dry Goods Economist*, 70 (January 8, 1916), 47.

store as well. At Filene's, for example, the store manager and a counselor were known to the female employees as "Dad" and "Mother" respectively through the 'teens and 'twenties.[28] Managers were confident that the sorry product of an unfortunate home and a misguided school would change through the benevolent influence of the store. Samuel Reyburn, President of Lord & Taylor and a key figure in department store management circles in the 'twenties and 'thirties, spoke glowingly of the impact of the store environment on such a girl:

> Constant contact with the woman who is in charge of her department will have an influence on her. Daily contact with other girls who have been subjected to influences in business will have an influence on her. Daily observations of customers in the building will influence her, and slowly she will change because of these influences. She will lower the tone of her voice, grow quiet in her manner, exhibit better taste in the selection of her clothes, become more considerate of others.[29]

But, Reyburn continued, this "natural" process was too slow and haphazard, and in the enlightened store would be hurried along by training—the organized, deliberate effort to resocialize the department store saleswoman.

This process of resocialization can for present purposes be separated into two strands. The first, commonly known as welfare work, flourished during the first two decades of the century although its effects continued to be felt thereafter. The second, a variety of programs grouped under the heading of training, began in the second decade of the century but spread after 1920. The two phases were not in fact separate in aim and frequently overlapped in execution, but they focused on different aspects of the task of developing skilled selling: the first primarily concerned store facilities for workers, and the second involved activities explicitly designed to teach the new skill. Class and sex were central issues in both efforts.

Welfare work combined workers' facilities—rest rooms, lounges, dining rooms, gymnasiums, infirmaries, and libraries—with some rudimentary educational activities along the lines of personal hygiene, etiquette, and grammar classes. Welfare work, in the store as in the factory, had many meanings. Among these were the desire for good publicity, the hope of preventing union organization, and the belief that happier workers would be more efficient workers. In

[28] *The Echo*, 7 (January 1910); 14 (December 6, 1918); 15 (December 5, 1919); 21 (January 25, 1924); Memorial to T.K. Cory, August 25, 1925; 25 (May 6, 1927); 33 (September 7, 1934).

[29] "Training for Selling," *Convention Proceedings, Fourth Annual Convention, Store Managers' Division, National Retail Dry Goods Association* (New York, 1927), 102.

the store, however, welfare work assumed the added burden of dampening class conflict across the counter. One enthusiastic writer likened Jordan Marsh's employee facilities to a "high-class hotel," asking rhetorically: "If a girl, say, reared in humble surroundings, spends some part of her day amid pictures and cheerful furniture and tasteful rugs and books and sunlight, will she not insensibly acquire a clearer insight into the ideas and needs of the majority of the store's customers? Will she not, then, be better able to wait upon her trade deftly, sympathetically, and understandingly?"[30]

Welfare work illustrates the double imperative under which retail managers were operating in fostering production and consumption simultaneously, and the retail literature reflects their delight that such measures served both ends. Medical programs, for example, could cut costs: in one store, described by the dean of department store doctors, a health program had so reduced absenteeism that the work force could be cut by fifty-four people.[31] On the other hand, these programs could help to eliminate health problems related to class status and thus eliminate a jarring note in the palace of consumption: in the words of a journalist, "A customer is attracted to a person of wholesome appearance [and] will promptly and quite excusably shrink from a clerk whose hair shows the presence of vermin, or who is careless in controlling a cough."[32] In the end, of course, welfare work promised to do even more than mollify the socially concerned customer and transform the working-class saleswoman—it sought to attract the elusive "better class" of salesperson to a store that was a more attractive and respectable place to work.

Welfare work helped to change the popular image of the shopgirl by improving the working conditions of the saleswoman and by beginning to attack the class-based characteristics that managers found so troublesome. Still, it gave no positive vision of what the new skilled salesperson would be like; clean towels, hot meals, and edifying literature could set the stage for skilled selling, but they could not write the script. This task fell to training programs. Tremendously varied in their specifics, these programs were in general an attempt to build upon the education aspects of welfare work, with a sharper focus on the specific demands of department store selling. Like welfare work, training programs had two

[30] "Jordan-Marsh Ninth Floor Heralds New Era in Personnel Work," *Dry Goods Economist*, 74 (March 13, 1920), 73.

[31] Arthur B. Emmons, *Health Control in Mercantile Life: A Problem of Conserving Human Life* (New York, 1926), 222–224.

[32] "Hygiene Behind the Counter," *Survey*, 36 (1916), 434; see also "Training the Help," *Dry Goods Economist*, 65 (September 30, 1911), 41.

components. One sought to increase immediate, quantifiable efficiency—for example, to train saleswomen to be punctiliously accurate in filling out sales checks. The other focused on developing the salesperson's ability to cope creatively with situations requiring discretionary behavior instead of cut-and-dried compliance with rules.[33] It is the second that primarily concerns us here, for it was this aspect that defined and, in so far as possible, transmitted selling skill.

Discretionary selling training took many forms, but from its inception until at least 1940, it fell into two broad categories: merchandise training and salesmanship training.[34] The first included instruction in the historical development of a given type of merchandise, its manufacturing process, its properties, and its uses. The content of merchandise training was a curious amalgam of high culture (in, for example, visits to museums), traditional womanly wisdom about homemaking and dress, newer "scientific" information about the care of merchandise, and the dictates of fashion. As a whole, however, the message was a simple one: to convey a respectable notion of "good taste" to the saleswoman. In the words of Helen Rich Norton, an important figure in retail training circles during this period, "the broadest and most important of the aims" of retail training was to convey to the students "[i]mproved standards of living, better habits of thought, higher interpretations, and ideals."[35]

Some attempts to reach this goal verged on the absurd: the National Retail Dry Goods Association, the department store trade association, and the *Dry Goods Economist* both circulated films showing life in Palm Beach and Miami so that salespeople could develop the "mental 'atmosphere'" to properly advise resort-bound customers.[36] Norton's textbook, *Retail Selling*, included a five-page list of essential French terms, with the cautionary note that they should be taught by a French teacher.[37] Whether the goal was to apply a veneer of middle-class trappings or to remake the saleswoman's "inner consciousness,"[38] the target was the same: the saleswoman's class identity.

[33] Personnel Group of the National Retail Dry Goods Association, *The Scope of Training for Retail Store Service*, publication of the Federal Board for Vocational Education, Trade and Industrial Education Service (Washington, D.C., 1929), 4.

[34] Helen Rich Norton, *Department-Store Education: An Account of the Training Methods Developed at the Boston School of Salesmanship, Under the Direction of Lucinda Wyman Prince*, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education Bulletin, 1917, No. 9 (Washington, D.C.), 13–20; "Sales Training," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 22 (March 1940), 67.

[35] Norton, *Department-Store Education*, 12.

[36] "Fashion Training for Salespeople of Ready-to-Wear," *Journal of Retailing*, 4 (April 1928), 29.

[37] Helen Rich Norton, *A Textbook on Retail Selling* (Boston, 1919), 272–276; see also, Personnel Group of the National Retail Dry Goods Association, *The World of Fashion* (New York, National Retail Dry Goods Association, 1931), I, 9–45; II, 47–61.

[38] "Expose Employees to Knowledge," *Department Store Economist*, 1 (August 10, 1938), 35.

By contrast, salesmanship training attempted to build on the saleswoman's gender identity. Women had been trained to be consumers even before they were trained to be saleswomen: for example, they were encouraged to be conscious of dress, in terms of fashion as well as technical details. Such a consciousness became selling skill when saleswomen could guess a customer's size at a glance or estimate her budget by assessing the clothes she wore.[39] Similarly, saleswomen had as women been socialized to deal with affect, to develop talents in sensing and meeting people's needs: once behind the counter, they had only to apply their interpersonal talents to dealing with their customers.

The specific techniques taught by training programs encouraged saleswomen to develop their skills at interacting with other women in order to create sales where there would have been none. Trainers counseled saleswomen to expand the individual sales transaction through what was known as suggestion selling, and to set the stage for future transactions by building up a clientele of customers. Suggestion selling was by far the most popular tactic urged upon salespeople; the literature abounds with inspirational pieces touting, quite correctly, its powers to expand profits and cut costs.[40] Suggest a tie to go with a shirt—a second pair of hose—a handbag to match the shoes—a good buy on dishtowels—size up your customer's budget and preferences, and sell her the maximum amount of merchandise in a given visit to the store. Suggestion selling was as much a staple subject in the Filene's employee newspaper, *The Echo*, as it was in the trade press; a reading of *The Echo* shows that encouragement of suggestions went beyond mere exhortation, with prizes, bonuses, and write-ups as rewards to those who distinguished themselves at suggesting.[41] Skilled suggestion selling tested the mettle of the saleswoman: if she were uninspired, too aggressive, or timid, her effort to suggest more merchandise could at best fail and at worst alienate the customer.

Developing a clientele required a long-term rapport with customers, an ability to anticipate their needs and whims, and the same

[39] Felix Koch, "Making the Customer Happy with Her Purchase, Is Mabley's Selling Keystone," *Dry Goods Economist*, 78 (January 5, 1924), 33; Martha Elliott, "The Buyer's Share in Training," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 16 (July 1934), 39.

[40] George H. Louis, "The Gentle Art of Subtle Selling," *System*, 20 (August 1911), 149–154; "Two Sales to Each Customer," *System*, 31 (February 1917), 203; Research Bureau for Retail Training, *Personnel Research in Department Stores: A Report of Studies, 1918–1925* (Lancaster, Penn., 1927), 29–31; H.F. Twomey, "How to Raise the Average Sales Check Through Productive Advertising and Display," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 14 (July 1932), 492; Virginia Thatcher, "Organizing Suggested Sales," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 14 (September 1932), 667–670; Mary Curtis, "How Does a Good Saleswoman Sell?," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 17 (August 1935), 17–18.

[41] See, for example, *The Echo*, 10 (February 12, 1913); 17 (October 21, 1921); 29 (January 2, 1931).

delicate balance between increasing sales and avoiding offense. Saleswomen were urged to keep files of customers' addresses and buying habits, exhorted to remember their names, and encouraged to contact them about special merchandise. In order to deal successfully with her clientele, a saleswoman had to develop empathy with a varied group of comparative strangers, and to learn not only what sorts of merchandise they were interested in but also under what conditions and in what way she could approach them.[42]

Both suggestive selling and developing a clientele were general techniques which saleswomen could only be urged and not forced to use; more than any other aspect of skilled selling, they demanded the discretion, resourcefulness, and independence of judgment that were at the heart of the new style of selling. There was in fact a contradiction in trying to teach these techniques at all. Properly speaking, all training programs could hope to do was to encourage saleswomen to channel their interactive skills into the best possible relations with customers through suggestion selling and developing a clientele. In fact, executives at all levels in department stores recognized that the implementation of these tactics was a delicate process that depended on the complex social situation on the selling floor. They would be successful only when grounded in the salesperson-customer interaction; used formulaically, they would fall flat.

Saleswomen became expert in knowing when and how to use these methods, and managers were eager to appropriate that knowledge so that they could recycle it in training programs. One of the most widely used textbooks on salesmanship, *How to Sell at Retail*, was mainly a compendium of the "practical methods" used by "three hundred expert salespeople."[43] By and large, however, the evidence both from the trade press and from Filene's shows that managers waged a losing battle to wrest shop-floor secrets from their salespeople. They tried both the carrot—offering payments for suggestions about improving selling service and stories about feats of selling—and the stick—requiring employees to fill out "call slips" whenever a customer requested an item that was out of stock.[44] Neither method persuaded salespeople that they should share their

[42] Henry A. Breithaupt, "Putting Personality into a Store," *System*, 48 (August 1925), 222–224; Caroline Spalding, "Case Studies in Training," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 18 (February 1936), 86–87; Lynn Sumner, "Retailing by Wire," *System*, 15 (1909), 281.

[43] Werrett Wallace Charters, *How To Sell at Retail* (Boston, 1922), vii.

[44] "A Reminder to Clerks," *Dry Goods Economist*, 63 (October 9, 1909), 109; "What Happens to the Want Slips in Your Store?", *Dry Goods Economist*, 79 (September 5, 1925), 18; *The Echo*, 1 (October 1, 1902); 5 (June 1907); 15 (July 17, 1919).

on-the-job wisdom with their superiors, and managers repeatedly argued the necessity and bemoaned the ineffectiveness of suggestion drives and call slips.

Management Training Fails

In the end, however, it was not just a classic workers' resistance to surrendering knowledge to managers, but rather the complex workings of class and sex, that undermined the attempt to turn shopgirls into skilled saleswomen. The women behind the nation's counters were alert to the fact that there was a disturbing two-sidedness to the vision of skilled selling that was presented to them by their bosses. Managers encouraged their saleswomen to forget the fact that department store selling was "looked upon by the public as the Cinderella of occupations" and to think of it as a highly trained vocation that conferred dignity on those who practiced it.[45] John Wanamaker refused to have his employees called "shopgirls" or "help," and asserted that "We are men and women, living our lives, doing our share, doing it with dignity, doing it in the most respectable way."[46] *The Echo* was somewhat more grandiose, likening the development of the art of selling to the work of ministers and lawyers; few made the exact comparison, but many referred to selling as a profession.[47] Perhaps the fullest statement of the self-image that skilled selling was supposed to foster appeared in a discussion of the work of Lucinda Prince, the head of the National Retail Dry Goods Association's education department from its founding in 1915 until her death in 1935: "The change in the individual is a new conception of the dignity of work in general and of the chosen occupation in particular. There is a satisfaction that comes with mastery of certain of the forces of one's environment, and a pride inseparable from acquired skill and the achievements it makes possible."[48]

In fact, managers' policies tended to foster dignity only rhetorically. For better or for worse, one criterion by which our society assesses an occupation's dignity is its compensation, and the pay of saleswomen remained low in comparison to alternatives available to women in office and factory.[49] For a short period in 1920, the *Dry*

[45] "General Type of Employee Must Be Raised, Charters Asserts," *Dry Goods Economist*, 74 (February 28, 1920), 17.

[46] *Dry Goods Economist*, 63 (November 21, 1908), 49.

[47] *The Echo*, 1 (August 1902).

[48] *Report of the United States Commissioner of Education, 1916*, I, 173 (Washington, D.C., 1917). I am indebted to Janice Weiss for this quotation.

[49] National Retail Dry Goods Association, *Ninth Annual Convention Bulletin* (New York, 1920), II, 55-67; "Corsetiere or Corset-eer—Which?", *Dry Goods Economist*, 74 (January 17, 1920), 197.

Goods Economist urged that higher salaries would change both the image and practice of selling, but the argument convinced only an enlightened few among department store managers, such as those at Filene's.[50] At about the same time, store executives began to use a variety of incentive-payment schemes such as commission and quota-bonus, but they administered them so as to raise productivity and not earnings.[51]

Perhaps even more important in the day-to-day conduct of the store, however, was the fact that saleswomen were not treated as dignified professionals; if anything, they were treated more like servants. Generations of clerks chafed under John Wanamaker's pronouncement that the customer was always right. Although few stores enforced it literally—that would have been too costly—the maxim still prescribed servile and unquestioning demeanor for saleswomen: it was unacceptable to correct an error or parry an insult by a customer.[52] A 1938 survey of both customers and salespeople about what they considered to be "successful" salesperson responses to customer objections to merchandise—a successful response being one to which customers reacted favorably—made clear the types of behavior that were necessary for fruitful interactions. The most successful responses involved *"encouraging," "deferential,"* and *"conciliatory"* remarks; the sales-squelching comebacks included those "indicating a *superior attitude," "indicative of personal opinion,"* or *"contradicting."*[53] The same balance sheet would serve equally well if mistresses and servants had been questioned.

Department store life included more tangible signs of servitude for saleswomen. Many, for example, objected to helping customers try on clothing since it involved the servile intimacy associated with being a maid.[54] They loathed the systems that stores devised for special control or inspection of salespersons' personal packages; one manager testified that one of the most popular steps he ever took was to abolish his store's parcel-checking system.[55] Saleswomen also

[50] "The Salesforce Payroll," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (September 3, 1910), 35; "Salaries," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (September 24, 1910), 79; "The Clerk's Difficulties," *Dry Goods Economist*, 64 (October 22, 1910), 61; Mary LaDame, *The Filene Store: A Study of Employes' Relation to Management in a Retail Store* (New York, 1930), 148–152, 159–160.

[51] Anne Bezanson and Miriam Hussey, *Wage Methods and Selling Costs* (Philadelphia, 1930), see esp. ch. 4.

[52] *The Echo*, 14 (May 23 and June 28, 1918); "Ten Commandments in Selling," *Dry Goods Economist*, 79 (April 18, 1925), 24–30.

[53] Josephine Boyle, "Answering Customers' Objections," *Journal of Retailing*, 14 (December 1938), 120.

[54] *The Echo*, 26 (March 30, 1928); Susan Katherine Manning, "An Analysis of a Merchandising Department (Foundation Garments) with Organized Material for a Departmental Training Program: A Study Made in Nine Pittsburgh Stores" (M.A. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1930) 26.

[55] Store Management Group of the National Retail Dry Goods Association, *Mid-Year Convention Proceedings* (New York, 1942), 139.

resented rules that confined them to segregated store facilities, and made that resentment amply clear to management. They objected to separate employee entrances, particularly when they were tucked into dingy back streets and contrasted too obviously with the customers' gracious doorways.[56] Saleswomen at Filene's regularly violated rules restricting them to certain elevators and stairways and prohibiting them from using the customers' lounges and writing rooms.[57] The two-class system of store facilities smacked of the upstairs-downstairs division of the servant's experience and clashed with the rhetoric that termed selling a dignified profession. A writer for the *Dry Goods Economist*, who had once been a saleswoman, was distressed by the complaint of Minnie, a former comrade behind the counter: "Here I feel practically like a servant." The writer went on to say, "and there are hundreds of girls and women who feel more or less as Minnie did, but who are not so frank. Where on earth this 'servant' idea originated I was never able to figure out. I have known successful, mature saleswomen who would become defiant and belligerent at the mere mention of the word 'servant.' They loved their work and would have been miserable doing anything else, and yet they had that sensitive spot."[58]

Dress rules intensified the impression of the servile status of saleswomen, and a detailed examination of the hotly argued issue of clerks' garb shows how a management policy could have unintended and contradictory effects. It is difficult to date the appearance of dress regulations in department stores, but they were not yet universal by 1910. A *Dry Goods Economist* editorial made it clear that the question of dress had important implications for class relations within the store: "In certain departments of some stores the saleswomen are attired, hairdressed, and manicured to a point which seems to put them out of the class of business women, and thus tends to complicate their relations with the customer, or possible customer."[59]. Management attempted to eliminate this problem by requiring all saleswomen to dress in the same color, usually black or navy blue, in the hope that drab colors would minimize the "danger of display of poor taste and lack of background on the part of employees."[60] In this case as in others, simple rules did not suffice to

[56] "They Put Martha in Kitchenware, And Left Her—So Someone Else Got Her," *Dry Goods Economist*, 74 (January 3, 1920), 19.

[57] *The Echo*, 10 (December 7, 1912 and April 30, 1913); 14 (January 11, 1918), 21 (April 4, 1924); 22 (February 6, 1925); 24 (February 18, 1927); "Martha in Kitchenware," 19–20.

[58] "Customers Who Have Tried to Uplift Me," *Dry Goods Economist*, 73 (January 11, 1919), 105.

[59] "Saleswomen's Appearance," 44.

[60] "Employees' Dress Regulations," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 10 (October 1928), 457.

produce pleasingly dressed saleswomen, and a number of stores placed mannequins garbed in clothing deemed to be suitable in style and color near employees' locker or lunch rooms.[61]

We can trace through the pages of *The Echo* the evolution of dress regulations at Filene's and glimpse the responses of saleswomen as well as the policies of managers. The net effect of these rules was clearly to undermine the saleswoman's sense of herself as a dignified worker and a handmaiden of consumption. No single issue aroused more interest in the selling force, and no single rule provoked more dislike. Filene's had mandated black for saleswomen as early as the turn of the century, but in 1902 the management considered uniforms; *The Echo*'s interviews showed that saleswomen were unanimously opposed to the proposal. One woman asserted that uniforms would be "a badge of service," and others complained that they would look like, variously, orphans, charity patients, paupers, and waitresses.[62]

The battle over dress standards waxed and waned for the next four decades; although the specific terms of the debate changed over time, saleswomen at every point affirmed their preference for more relaxed standards. In 1913, for example, four-fifths of the saleswomen demanded the right to choose between black and white garments, on the grounds that "the management owed us the right to dress as we pleased."[63] In 1930, saleswomen invoked their rarely used right to a store-wide referendum under the terms of the store's worker-participation plan; they voted twenty to one in favor of a broad standard prescribing only that they dress in "business-like styles and neutral shades." The justification this time referred not to their offended dignity or rights, but contained a barely veiled threat to management that saleswomen meant to practice what they preached to their customers. The women of one department warned that they could not sell effectively if they didn't feel that they were "dressed well and look[ed] smart.[64] Management refused to bend the existing rules, but the choice could not have been a simple one: by continuing to require monochromatic dress, they were undermining not only their own efforts to have saleswomen think of their work as skilled and dignified, but also their attempts to spread the culture of consumption. The dilemma was endemic to the industry: a measure,

[61] "Store Instructs High School Students," *Dry Goods Economist*, 69 (March 13, 1915), 33; *The Echo*, 39 (March 27, 1931).

[62] *The Echo*, 1 (December 1902).

[63] *The Echo*, 10 (February 26, 1913). See also January 29, February 12, and February 19, 1913.

[64] *The Echo*, 29 (June 27 and July 18, 1930). See also July 11, September 26, and October 3, 1930, and March 27, 1931.

like this one, designed to serve one of the retailer's goals frequently sabotaged other aspects of his management strategy.

Similar contradictions grew out of management's encouragement of skilled selling through suggestions and developing a clientele. Suggestion selling required the exercise of initiative and empathy in a deferential context, but in practice saleswomen often assumed a kind of equality with customers, to the distress of customers and managers alike.

> A smart-looking business woman, with an air of authority, approached the counter and asked to see a stylish and serviceable low collar. The girl put forward a collar that was a specialty of a leading firm.
>
> "Here's one that we are selling lots of to stenographers and typewriters, and lots of us girls have bought 'em, too," the girl explained.
>
> Harriet saw a shade of resentment pass over the woman's face, as she set her lips firmly, dropped the collar and started to turn away.[65]

The complaint that saleswomen were too forward in imposing their judgment on customers is a staple of the retailing literature.[66] Managers' attempts to encourage saleswomen to develop independent judgment, "good taste," and a fashion sense conflicted sharply with their desires to have the clerks display servant-like deference. A saleswoman firm in her conviction that she had the last word on fashion was prone to sneer at a customer whose dress or merchandise requests were less modish.[67]

The issue of clientele was no less problematic. Saleswomen took the charge to develop a continuing relationship with a group of customers more literally than managers intended, and frequently refused to wait on, or at least to wait on effectively, a customer outside their charmed circle.[68] Moreover, they served their clientele in ways that went far beyond management's definition of good service; saleswomen, for example, sometimes hid merchandise until it was ready for a markdown, at which point they would alert a favored customer.[69] Managers wanted saleswomen who had the social skills to get along well with customers and to be able to advise them tactfully on fashion questions—but the women most skilled in these respects were likely to be equally independent and resourceful in dealing with their employers. Moreover, since managers constantly gave mixed messages about dignity and deference, it was not

[65] "Told to the Salespeople," *Dry Goods Economist*, 67 (March 8, 1913), 95.

[66] Westlaw Keene, "Fabrics," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 22 (May 1940), 48.

[67] "The Covert Sneer," *Dry Goods Economist*, 66 (June 1, 1912), 41; Anne Shannon Moore, "What I Don't Like When I Go Shopping," *System*, 37 (May 1920), 962-964.

[68] Robert W. Pogue, "A Bonus Plan that Cut Costs," *System*, 37 (January 1920), 62.

[69] Margaret Holbrook Titcomb, "Selling to the Selling Force," *Dry Goods Economist*, 80 (December 19, 1925), 13.

surprising that saleswomen had at best a mixed sense of loyalty to their bosses. By encouraging saleswomen to use their "womanly" skills of interaction and empathy on the job, managers set loose forces whose operation it was impossible to control closely.

Even more serious was managers' failure to break the grip of saleswomen's own ways of managing the selling floor. During the years when managers had allowed their sales forces to grow "like Topsy," the saleswomen had given their own brand of order to the selling floor. Observers throughout the period under consideration remarked upon the social order of the selling floor, but perhaps the definitive assessment of saleswomen's informal self-government came from George F. F. Lombard, who observed the children's clothing departments at Macy's in 1940, three decades after managers had begun to try to control the selling floor and the skill of its workers. Lombard concluded:

> Within the limits of the facilities themselves, the processes of control . . . allowed a very full elaboration of the values important to each of the groups and to many of the individual girls. . . [T]he salesgirls achieved this opportunity for the expression of self in what is often considered a restricted environment—a business organization—where the need for profits and the relative sameness of working conditions have seemed to many to offer little—and sometimes no—chance for self-expression. . . . These salesgirls, women of different ages, products of different cultures, had achieved for themselves a way of life whose effectiveness in terms of controlling behavior we can view only with great respect.[70]

In the years when salespeople were haphazardly chosen and barely trained, if at all, saleswomen developed a de facto apprenticeship system whereby newcomers were initiated into the complex dynamics of the selling floor by their peers rather than by their superiors. When management tried to appropriate this function through training programs, saleswomen received the newly trained workers with reactions ranging from wariness to hostility; each had to be "retrained" on the selling floor according to the department's unwritten rules. Ways of relating to one another, to customers, and to management were firmly conveyed by precept and example to new saleswomen, and this informal training system was remarkably impervious to managers' initiatives.[71]

[70] George F. F. Lombard, *Behavior in a Selling Group: A Case Study of Interpersonal Relations in a Department Store* (Boston, 1955), 160.

[71] I have written in detail of these and other shop-floor practices of saleswomen; see "'The Clerking Sisterhood'; Rationalization and the Work Culture of Saleswomen in American Department Stores, 1890–1960," *Radical America*, 12 (March-April 1978), 41–55, and "The Customers Ain't God: The Work Culture of Department Store Saleswomen," in Daniel Walkowitz and Michael Frisch, eds., *Working-Class History: Toward an Integrated View of Labor in American Life* (forthcoming from University of Illinois Press in 1982).

Conclusion

Department store managers by and large failed to replace the shopgirl with a skilled saleswoman who met their complex and contradictory specifications. Three decades of efforts to train a skilled selling force left retail managers little more satisfied with the performance of the women behind their counters in 1940 than they were in 1910. One despairing writer opined, "In spite of the efforts of training departments, the standard of service remains mediocre. . . [F]ew clerks can be depended upon really to facilitate an intelligent choice."[72] Managerial disillusion was reflected in the trade press: articles on the need for skilled selling increasingly shared the spotlight after 1940 with testimonials to the necessity of "self-selection" or "simplified selling"—both euphemisms for self-service.[73] Dramatic changes in the nation's social and economic climate, which are beyond the scope of this discussion, reinforced store executives' sense that skilled selling could no longer be the foundation of their sales strategy. Reeling under the impact of the depression and World War II and painfully aware of the failure of their training programs, they embarked upon a new path that their successors still follow today.

The history of management policy toward department store saleswomen provides a useful case study that both revises and broadens our conceptions of business experience in the twentieth century. The path followed by department store managers was related to, though distinct from, that taken by their counterparts in factories. Rationalization in stores relied far less on scientific management than in factories, and far more on the skills of employees. Thus it becomes critical for business historians to study the interactions between managers and workers; when the worker's importance to the enterprise increased, as it did in the department store, so too did her power to disrupt.

The study of a specific industry, far from narrowing our perspective, greatly broadens it. Only by seeing how major trends and social forces interact in the crucible of a concrete situation can we grasp the full complexity of historical change. The study of department store management provides the opportunity to understand the ways in which larger business trends such as rationalization, personnel management, and the culture of consumption

[72] Kenneth Collins, "The Trend Toward Self-Service," *Journal of Retailing*, 16 (December 1940), 99.

[73] See, for example, Franklin Lamb, "Store Service Economics," *Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, 25 (February 1943), 30, 34; and Robert G. Seymour, "Simplify Your Selling and Take a Profit!," *Stores*, 34 (December 1952, 24, 41–42.

interconnected with, and sometimes contradicted, one another. Finally, it shows the way in which managers have responded to two of the most basic categories in our society: class and sex.